

TEACHING FROM OBJECTS AND CLASSICS IN A COLLEGE ART GALLERY

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Abstract

The Daura Gallery exists to support the mission of Lynchburg College by being a resource for teaching through the collection, care, interpretation and exhibition of works of art. This paper examines the Lynchburg College undergraduate museum studies program, which combines teaching from the objects in the Daura Gallery collection with the Lynchburg College Symposium Readings, Classical Selections on Great Issues (LCSR). This innovative program connects ideas and objects, and develops critical thinking skills through readings by such diverse authors as Thorstein Veblen, Leo Tolstoy, Chief Joseph and Elie Wiesel. These readings foster discussion of the theory and practice of museum education, exhibitions and programming; ethical standards for museums; issues of sensationalism and pornography; government support of the arts and humanities; the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act; the repatriation of Holocaust-era assets; and other current legal and ethical issues.

Introduction

The Daura Gallery was founded in 1974 with a facility of limited scope and a modest collection consisting of work by the College's art students and regional artists. The Gallery was expanded in 1990 and again in 1995, and the collection now includes more than 1000 paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture. During this time, the Gallery catered primarily to members of the general public interested in local art and the Catalan-American artist Pierre Daura, for whom the Gallery was named and who is represented in the collection with 160 works of art. Little effort was made to reach out to the College community, with the exception of the annual student art exhibition, and by the late 1990s, the College's faculty, staff, students and alumni were increasingly disengaged from the Daura Gallery.

In 1997, under new administration, the mission of the Gallery was expanded and the Gallery became a resource for teaching through the collection, care, interpretation and exhibition of works of art. The Gallery sought to serve the campus and the larger community by providing opportunities for learning, enjoyment and personal growth; by deepening our understanding of human experience and cultural diversity; and by strengthening the creative and curricular life of the College. To this end, the Daura Gallery provided a wide range of changing exhibitions and related programs that actively complement, support, and challenge the academic experience of Lynchburg College students, and encourage the interdisciplinary affiliation of the visual arts with other disciplines of the humanities, sciences, education and business. Also in 1997, the decision was made to establish a museum studies program and use the Daura Gallery as a teaching laboratory.

Lynchburg College Symposium Readings

An integral aspect of museum studies is teaching from the object and utilizing the collections of a college or university's museums and galleries. In this regard, the

museum studies program at Lynchburg College is no exception. What is exceptional about the program is its use of readings from the classics.

Since its founding in 1903, Lynchburg College—a private, coeducational, comprehensive college—has fostered a learning environment that has encouraged reading good books, asking meaningful questions, and reflecting on great ideas. As a continuation of this tradition, the college publishes its own ten-volume set of classical readings through the University Press of America. Lynchburg College Symposium Readings—Classical Selections on Great Issues (hereafter referred to as LCSR) addresses, but is not limited to, such themes as poverty and wealth, tyranny and freedom, the nature of the universe, imagination and creativity, faith and morals, human nature and war and peace. In 1988, the college created a bold approach to liberal studies by extending the use of the symposium readings across the curriculum and engaging students in the discussion of these texts throughout their four years at Lynchburg College.

An LCSR course is a regular Lynchburg College course in which at least 20 percent of the grade is based on written and oral communication related to reading assignments from the Lynchburg College Symposium Readings. The LCSR Program is an innovative approach, integrating selections from classic works to supplement regular class material and providing elements of integration, depth and broad perspectives within the context of regular courses. In these courses, students grapple with the great issues facing humanity from the perspectives of Western and non-Western civilizations. Our mission is to foster interdisciplinary study by all students, to read from texts of classic and modern significance, and to write and speak about them in the context of contemporary society. Simply put, Lynchburg College has committed itself to placing the Great Books of Western Civilization, from Plato to Freud, at the heart of its entire curriculum—whether a student is in accounting, nursing, the humanities, the

sciences or, of course, museum studies (Lynchburg College Symposium Readings Mission Statement 1995). Approximately 10 percent of courses taught at Lynchburg College are LCSR courses.

Museum Studies at Lynchburg College

The museum studies program provides a case study for the LCSR program, as it combines teaching from the objects in the Daura Gallery collection with LCSR. Museum studies at Lynchburg College is an interdisciplinary program that stresses theoretical concepts and develops practical skills that will prepare students to understand museums as a cultural and educational resource. It is currently the only interdisciplinary undergraduate program in Virginia. The minor is open to students in any major. To date, students with majors such as studio art, business, communication studies, graphic design, history, marketing, sports management and theatre have enrolled in museum studies classes. The program is administered by the School of Communication and the Arts. Close links exist with the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, the School of Sciences, the School of Business and Economics and the School of Education.

The curriculum is structured to provide students with opportunities to pursue academic or disciplinary interests as well as museological interests, thus providing basic knowledge that is essential to the varied professional emphases in museum careers. The majority of graduates in the minor have a strong interest in continuing their education in graduate programs. The museum studies program also helps prepare students for opportunities in arts management relevant to the fine arts, music and theatre.

The fourfold objectives of the program are of equal priority: (1) Students will explore intellectual curiosity, independent learning and new and different ideas, and will build intellectual competencies—analyzing and decision making—through the study of the missions, goals and purposes of museums; (2) Students will develop an integrated worldview and experience the diversity of other cultures through the study of the missions, goals and purposes of museums; (3) Students will gain an understanding of: (a) the historical, contemporary and future nature and role of museums in society; (b) the governance and management of museums; (c) ethical and legal aspects of museum operations; (d) management, preservation, presentation and interpretation of collections; (e) maintenance of physical facilities; and (f) the conduct of educational and outreach programs; (4) Students will combine the study of an academic specialty with the study of museology. Students will learn through formal instruction, individual research and practical experience—through courses of study and internships that teach the history, theory and

practice of museology, and through knowledge of other academic disciplines.

Teaching is object-centered, and the Daura Gallery at Lynchburg College is used as a primary teaching resource and laboratory for the program. This provides students the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to artifacts and works of art in the College's collection. The curriculum includes fundamentals of collections management, applied research, legal and ethical issues and practicum experience. Indeed, the program's capstone course involves the students in curating an exhibition, albeit one of limited scope. It does, however, introduce them to the processes involved in planning, developing and mounting exhibitions. More importantly, the program stresses critical and creative thinking skills. Further, it challenges assumptions and advances the concepts that question-raising and engaging in a dialogue should be central to the mission of any museum, that interpretation is never complete, never all-encompassing, but always fragmentary, and that the goals of all museums should focus not on what we are or what we have, but on accountability for what we do.

Incorporation of the Classics

An integral component of the museum studies students' education is global awareness and an expansion of their worldview. This is in keeping with the College's mission:

To develop students to have strong character and balanced perspectives, to prepare them for intelligent and wholehearted participation in a global society and for effective leadership in the civic, professional, spiritual, and social dimensions of life. (Lynchburg College Mission Statement 2002)

This goal is achieved, in great part, through LCSR readings.

While this incorporation of readings from the classics may seem tenuous, the readings enhance and expand the dialogue, connect the course content with the liberal arts education in general, and give students the intellectual and academic foundation with which to seek meaningful answers to life's unceasing questions.

These readings foster discussion of the theory and practice of museums, exhibitions and programming; ethical standards for museums; government support of the arts and humanities; cultural patrimony; the repatriation of Holocaust-era assets; and other current issues in museums. Works of art and artifacts in the Daura Gallery collections are then used to illustrate the concepts and issues, and to make the abstract concrete. I propose that this concept, using myriad readings, is transferable to any museum studies curriculum.

The LCSR course, *Issues in Museums*, examines the ethical and legal issues of governance, administration

and collections management facing museums in the new millennium. Among the objectives of the course is for students to think objectively, logically and reflectively about these issues, and use reasoning and evidence to reach and justify conclusions about the issues.

The LCSR readings that inform the discussion of philanthropy, ownership of artifacts and responsibility to the public are excerpts from Thorstein Veblen's "The Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899), and Andrew Carnegie's "The Gospel of Wealth" (1889). Veblen wishes to obtain a better understanding of the need to build a society with a leisure class, and to develop an understanding of the meaning of *leisure* in modern Western, industrial society. In seeking answers to his questions, Veblen notes that the "emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership" of property. A principal question for students is, "For what purpose does humankind amass wealth and by what standards is success gauged?"

Andrew Carnegie's "The Gospel of Wealth" acknowledges the gap between rich and poor in industrial societies. Carnegie attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in the creation of wealth, which he sees as resulting from incontrovertible social laws and social condition, while arguing that it is important to retain the lever of wealth for future social progress. He lived up to his word and gave away his fortune to socially beneficial projects, most famously by funding libraries. Discussion revolves around the charitable responsibilities of wealthy individuals. The Daura Gallery and its collections are used as critical examples of patronage and ownership of objects.

The museum studies program also challenges students to recognize the necessity of using multiple disciplinary perspectives that are addressed in the mission and programs of museums to examine complex human issues, problems and themes that affect the world community. The LCSR readings used to discuss the issues of sensationalism and pornography, government support for the arts and humanities, the public role of museums as centers of object-based learning and how museums both reflect and examine past and current social issues through the use of cultural artifacts are Leo Tolstoy's "What is Art?" (1896), Theodore Roosevelt's "An Art Exhibition" (a review of the Armory Show in New York in 1913), and Alfred North Whitehead's "The Aims of Education" (1929).

In "The Aims of Education," Whitehead states, Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them the

ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art.

This statement informs discourse of the role of museums as educational institutions.

The discussion of the cultural patrimony, cultural sensitivity and ownership of sacred objects has focused in the past several years on the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (Public Law 101-601). It is informed by Chief Joseph's "An Indian's Views of Indian Affairs," which appeared in *North American Review* in April 1879. This year the dialogue will be expanded to include cultural patrimony and the trade of cultural artifacts by examining the looting of the Baghdad Museum. The LCSR reading for this discussion will be Cicero's *On the Laws*, which focuses on the issue of whether human virtues are the same in every culture.

The discussion of Nazi-era looting and the repatriation of these artifacts is informed by an excerpt from Elie Wiesel's "Night" (1958) that tells the story of the author's childhood and concentration camp experiences, and serves his self-described life task "to give testimony, to bear witness." This subject was powerfully addressed in 1999, when the Gallery held an exhibition on the role of the artist in war, and in 2000, with the traveling exhibition "Anne Frank in the World." The College's semester-long emphasis on the Holocaust included musical performances, lectures and a theatre production of "The Diary of Anne Frank," thus expanding the impact throughout the College community.

Results & Discussion

What is the impact of teaching from the object and from the classics? First and foremost, the museum studies program intentionally expands the conversation of museums into the realm of liberal arts education in general. Assessment data collected during the past academic year indicates that more than 50 percent of all students enrolled in all LCSR courses rated them at four or five (on a scale of one to five).

Sampled students, including museum studies students, respond that LCSR classes (1) have given them the opportunity to broaden their thinking about an important issue or theme either a lot or a great deal; (2) readings, class discussions and assignments have given them an opportunity to improve their comprehension skills and think critically about issues important to society today; and (3) course assignments allowed them to use ideas from at least one other discipline to reflect on an issue or a theme. When asked if they felt the program had improved their reading skills, more than 50 percent of the respondents answered with a rating of four or five. When students were asked to compare their courses to non-LCSR offerings to evaluate their level of classroom participation, discussion, presentations and so on, 80 percent rated their courses with a three, four

or five, with 53 percent rating them at four or five. When students were asked to compare their courses to non-LCSR offerings to evaluate their level of writing in- or outside of the classroom, 81 percent rated their courses with a three or higher, with 51 percent rating them at four or five. Furthermore, students indicated that they became more well-rounded as students, gained more opportunities to engage in classroom discussion and cultivated better understanding of other cultures.

In assessment data collected during the past two years specific to museum studies courses with LCSR selections, 100 percent of the students rated all categories of assessment—stimulating student interest, fostering student collaboration, establishing rapport, encouraging student development and structuring classroom experiences—at a level five. Comments included “stimulating” and “inspiring.”

Comments obtained in personal interviews from two museum studies students further support this documentation. One student who graduated in 2002 with a minor in museum studies said,

At first, I was skeptical about how the LCSR readings could enhance a class in museum studies. The readings didn't seem to have anything in common with a museum. However, the readings make you think and make connections between the past and present you might not consider otherwise. The readings really help develop critical thinking skills. Not only do the readings enhance critical thinking, they also help foster discussion and aid in supporting and making connections between ideas and objects.

Another student, who graduated in 2003 with a major in history and a minor in museum studies, wrote an essay on the legal and ethical considerations of museums under NAGPRA, based on elements of Public Law 101-601 and the Chief Joseph reading. Her essay was one of 11 works by faculty and students selected for the LCSR journal, *Agora*, in 2002 and was runner-up for the College's most prestigious student writing award. She stated,

The museum studies' program at Lynchburg College has an amazing interdisciplinary, multi-cultural approach that not only is applicable to the museum field but to any field that one would choose to enter. Like the museum field itself, the classes take a variety of sources from many cultures and time periods combined with information from the museum texts as well as LCSR readings to give a full, multifaceted picture of an issue or time or work of art or artifact.

Conclusion

Liberal arts education and the museum studies curriculum are indelibly linked through diverse readings in the classics that engage students in an expanded and elevated discourse on museum-related topics. The students who graduate from Lynchburg College with a minor in museum studies are just beginning a path to a museum career, one that by necessity will include further education and practical experience. Whether or not they choose a career in museums, they have developed as advocates of museums, both general and discipline-specific. These students have acquired a love of what museums now do, anticipation of what museums can do, and expectations of what museums should do.

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